

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 8, 2012

Agenda Item: Bighorn River (Hay Coulee) – Potential Land Donation

Division: Fish and Wildlife (Fisheries Bureau)

Action Needed: Endorse Course of Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background:

A private agricultural operator is considering a land donation of 70 or more acres along the Bighorn River to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. The property is located on the west side of the river at the mouth of Hay Coulee, approximately 13 river miles below the Bighorn Afterbay.

Establishing a public fishing access site on the west side of the Bighorn River has been an FWP priority for years. Unlike the characteristically steep topography along the river's west shore, the Hay Coulee property steps gradually down to the river. Hay Coulee has not been grazed for many years, and the vegetation is in excellent condition, including riparian cottonwoods.

The river section between the Afterbay and the Bighorn Fishing Access Site (located on the east side of the river approximately a mile above Hay Coulee) provides 190,278 angler days annually, the highest angler pressure in the region and third highest in the state. FWP biologists estimate there are up to 3,500 trout per mile in this section of the Bighorn River. FWP ownership of the Hay Coulee site could potentially spread out the fishing pressure on this outstanding trout fishery by providing access in an area that has not historically had public access. This location would also provide good angler access for wade fishing. The remoteness of the site would also allow provide quality upland game bird hunting and other recreational activities by the public on the upland portion of the property.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

There has been no public involvement prior to this proposal. If the commission chooses to endorse this proposal, the Department will proceed with its due diligence which will include MEPA and a public notification and 30 day public comment period.

Alternatives and Analysis:

There has been no environmental analysis done to date. Prior to FWP accepting the donation an environmental analysis would be completed which would also include public scoping. The public would be given 30 days to response to the proposed alternatives. FWP will evaluate all potential options as the project moves forward. The final analysis and recommendation will be presented to the commission for approval.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

The Department recommends that Commission endorse further evaluation of this project, during which time the landowner will determine whether he desires to make this donation, and FWP will further evaluate site access, environmental considerations, public comment and management alternatives. After this information has been evaluated, FWP will bring the project back to the Commission for final consideration.

Proposed Motion:

"I move that the Commission endorse further efforts by FWP staff to evaluate the possibility of accepting a donation of the Hay Coulee property on the Bighorn River as an FAS."